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AMERICAN IDEALS AND TRADITIONS

BY LINDSEY BLAYNEY

THE spirit of unrest so prevalent in the United States to-day is a source of apprehension to many of our citizens. Viewed from the conservative standpoint, this restlessness might well give rise to misgivings. A part of this uncertainty, however, examined in the perspective of world history, may also afford grounds for national self-congratulation. No one who has had the opportunity to learn the views of certain elements of our population will be inclined to minimize the unhealthful spirit actuating a no inconsiderable portion of our citizenship, nor its indirect, but unfortunate, effect upon a part of the youth of our country. But in our very human disinclination toward changing conditions, are we not confusing the results of two quite different movements? Indeed, a part of this very general feeling of uncertainty is a welcome sign of the times: for it is due in no small measure to the more or less acrimonious, but illuminating, debates upon the foreign policies of our Government from which have resulted a growing recognition of America's responsibilities toward the world at large.

There are many grave domestic questions demanding solution at the hands of the people of the United States. And yet, viewed in the light of world history, whatever may be the final verdict pronounced upon them, their effect upon human development will be largely local and transitory. There is, however, a great national question in process of solution almost unobserved by the American people, the results of which, expressed in terms of

human achievement, may alter profoundly the spiritual outlook of the nations of the world. The attitude of this republic toward world issues, if our people remain true to the fundamental ideals of our past, bids fair to work great changes in international morality and to influence human destinies long after our other "big issues" have been forgotten.

The late war has given a new significance to the word "Americanism". It has been misused so grievously, however, that as a rallying cry it is beginning to lose force. For under its ægis most contradictory movements have ranged themselves, differing widely in their aims and methods. Much apprehension might be avoided, and much unrest and uncertainty be allayed, if the scattered threads of our national hopes, endeavors, and achievements could be woven into a somewhat more substantial fabric of American ideals, even though in the process it might appear now and again that violence was being done to some popular traditions. For old ideas and prejudices die hard; and there are still many who feel that the tendency shown by the people of the United States in recent years to interest themselves in matters not peculiarly their own is a departure from the ideals of our forefathers; that even our participation in the Great War was a surprising and transient reversal of our political ideals of the past. Fortunately, however, the idealism of a nation, unlike its styles, is not a garment of morality nor of materialism which can be assumed or cast aside at will, however much the recent history of the United States might seem, to the casual observer, to prove the contrary.

Till quite recently we were considered by the Old World to be a nation of "mere money-makers", practically devoid of higher idealism. At this we need not be surprised. For as a people we are just emerging from adolescence, a period marked by all the inconsistencies, hesitations and experimentation common to the transition from youth to maturity. Hence in part this uncertainty, all the present-day controversies as to what really are the ideals of our nation, what "Americanism" means, and all those bitter discussions which, disconcerting though they be, are nevertheless fundamentally healthful. They mark the spiritual awakening of a people slowly coming to a realization of their national

and international obligations. The late war will be credited with this broadening of American vision and with having worked an almost magical transformation in the moral fibre of the nation. This would be regrettable, if it were true. National idealism, unlike political expediency, is not the very questionable product of a sudden moment of national stress. It is the synthesis of the aspirations of an entire people arrived at through a process of long and slow development. "American idealism", so-called, is not a thing of yesterday, European opinion to the contrary notwithstanding.

There was a time to be sure, indeed a good long time, when only a discouragingly small part of the American public could have been interested even passingly, much less aroused, by arguments appealing to national humanitarianism or national ideals. But in those days the American people were on the defensive, and rightly so. The population of the struggling Colonies, and of the no less weak States which succeeded them, however certain they may have felt of their soul's salvation by reason of profound religious conviction, were far less sure of their political salvation, due to no lack of hard common sense. With the vision of land-hungry and power-covetous European states watching their every move from the East, and with the uncertainties of the vast wilderness upon their frontiers to the West, the men of the infant republic did well to make "safety first" a cardinal principle of political life. European diplomacy and international intrigue taught the new nation to take no chances in the game of politics. The Monroe Doctrine as it was evolved in 1823, far from being the exhibition of national selfishness it has been considered by the nations of the Old World, was an eminently proper declaration of principle wholly justified by the exigencies of the hour. But reasonable and just as was this American doctrine in principle, it had in practice two widely distinct and far-reaching results: From it dated our exaggerated reputation abroad for national selfishness, and our over-confidence at home in the wisdom of continued national isolation.

For many years well informed Americans have been surprised and rendered indignant at the accusation of cupidity and selfishness directed against us by the Old World. Our writers have at

times attributed it to foreign envy of our growth and prosperity. This is, however, not wholly just. Foreign knowledge of the idealism of a country must necessarily depend largely upon two principal sources of information; upon the theoretical ideals of the nation as reflected in its translated literature and upon its practical ideals as translated into the foreign policies of its government. Our young literature, attracting but little international notice, exercised but small influence in introducing the profounder reaches of the American soul to the European man in the street. Nor, on the other hand, was the Monroe Doctrine, as viewed abroad, calculated to win admirers for our practical political idealism. Was it therefore to be wondered at that, the influence of literary America being negligible, our reputation for selfishness, due to our national policies, became all too general?

Only those who have resided abroad, and who have been in the position to read in the daily and magazine press of Europe, and to learn in heart to heart talks with its citizens, of the profound misconceptions harbored by the people of the Old World regarding the idealism of America, can fully appreciate the feelings of surprise and regret which these excusable, but unjust, opinions awakened in the hearts of Americans in those days. It was said that we were "selfish and self-centered", "chasers after the Almighty Dollar", "worshipers of the God of Gold in the Temple of Mammon"; that we were "boastful, brawling and brazen"; that America was "the land of get-rich-quick", the "land of opportunity and of ignorance", of "hypocritical piety" and of "shameless political corruption". In a word America was regarded as being practically devoid of higher idealism. Was it surprising then that even better informed Europeans, almost at the dawn of the twentieth century, saw "ulterior motives" behind our war with Spain? Americans in Europe, who heard and read these things, suffered. They realized that these opinions, founded to be sure on a certain amount of seemingly clear evidence, were nevertheless cruelly false. They hoped and longed for the day to come when Europe would awaken to a full realization of the big heart of the people of the United States. But so deep-seated was the conviction that we were a selfish and self-centered people that even the freeing of Cuba and the return of the Boxer Indem-

nity to China failed to convince Europe of our sincerity. The Old World believed that the "wily Yankee" must have had something up his sleeve to make it worth his while to dispense generosity on so large a scale.

Rather than harbor any resentment against pre-war Europe on account of the erroneous opinions it held regarding American ideals, should we not rather pause and ask ourselves what notion we had formed of our own characters say a quarter of a century ago or even less? Will it not be found that we entertained somewhat the same opinion concerning ourselves? Did we not pride ourselves upon our isolation? Did we not congratulate ourselves upon our apathy toward the larger problems of the world? Did we not deem it an almost typically American virtue to be able to close our minds and our hearts to the responsibilities and worries of "outside affairs"? We cannot reproach Europe so severely when we become aware that the opinion it entertained of us was not so entirely different from the estimate which we had unconsciously formed of ourselves. But our critics, as well as we, were wrong, and that too fundamentally. For, far from being materialists and selfish self-seekers, the people of the United States have always exhibited strong idealistic leanings. Could it well have been otherwise? The men and women who first came to these shores were largely idealists. This nation was conceived in the minds of idealists. The outstanding events—the turning points of its history—were prompted by idealists, and each of these several events carried a highly idealistic message to the nations of the world. These are broad generalities but they are true.

Our pioneer forefathers who crossed the seas to face the unknown dangers of an unknown world, who threaded the forest covered wilderness and launched their frail barks upon uncharted seas, and who in the midst of all this worshiped God according to the dictates of their consciences, were they not, in overwhelming majority, idealists? And even though some of them may not have been of idealistic temperament, and though many who followed in their wake later toward the forests and plains of the West may have dreamt at first more of material gain than of spiritual profit, yet the hearts of even such as these could not have failed in the end to attune themselves to the idealistic harmony of

nature in the presence of the spiritual charm of sombre forest and silent stream. These men and women of early America, who built their little cabins in some remote forest clearing in the very lap of generous Mother America, and who reared their children in the fear of God and in respect for the law in the midst of the inspiring grandeur of primeval nature—like all adventurers into the material or spiritual unknown—were storing unconsciously in their hearts great funds of idealism unto the day of crisis or of opportunity. We cannot refuse to credit a considerable proportion of the idealism of America to these later “natural” idealists who became merged with the earlier political and religious idealists into a nation which, despite temptations to the contrary, was and remained at bottom an idealistic people? And yet, strange as it may seem, with all these contributing forces of idealism woven into the warp and woof of our character, the United States became known nevertheless as a materialistic nation and, stranger still, came dangerously near believing the allegation to be true.

The fact that the unfolding of a great, isolated, national organism progresses quietly and normally, with no sudden demands of moments of national stress upon the moral and idealistic reserves of the nation, does not indicate that dynamic idealism is lacking. The sleeping volcano is often the more dangerous. This is as true in the spiritual as in the physical world. It was no less true in the spiritual development of the United States. Unheralded and unremarked, the days of crisis and of opportunity finally arrived for the opening of the flood-gates to the pent up reservoirs of the spiritual forces of the nation. Imperceptibly American idealism began to make itself felt as a great contributing force to the advancement of mankind.

As is the case in almost all great movements, its beginnings were modest and obscure. It received its greatest impetus from the enlarged opportunities inherited by the children and the children's children of those God-fearing pioneer settlers whose lives, while more circumscribed, had been none the less inwardly rich. The spirit of ready coöperation, mutual helpfulness, generous hospitality, sane frugality, and simple piety, characteristic of the early settlers, became blended in their descendants into remarkable manifestations of a spirit of broad and wise philanthropy.

When many years ago the need was felt, and the call went forth, for schools, colleges, universities, charitable organizations, scientific foundations, hospitals, libraries and museums, it was not the rich alone—as Europe and even too many Americans have believed—but the men and women of modest and even scant means who, in obedience to an inherited impulse, gave whole-heartedly of their hard earned substance to help their fellow men. While Europe was speaking cynically of our selfishness, greater endowments for philanthropic purposes than the history of the world had ever known were being established by the generosity and ready spirit of helpfulness of the American heart.

All of this did not happen in a day. So gradual and natural indeed had been the process that neither we nor the Old World realized its prophetic significance. And, stranger still, we who traditionally refused to interest ourselves in the affairs of the European Occident poured, with seemingly limitless prodigality, millions upon millions into the distant Orient in unselfish missionary and philanthropic enterprise, and stood ready even to protect our interests there, if necessary, by military force. All this but goes to prove that it was compelling political and military exigency, not selfish national ideals, which made us apparently an isolated, self-centered, and selfish people.

The gradual unfolding and widening of America's spiritual horizon necessarily had its effect upon the political outlook of the nation. Here too the change was so gradual and natural that it was scarcely noticed either at home or abroad. It was but a quarter of a century ago that we went to bed one night, secure as we thought behind our impregnable, Chinese-like wall of political isolation, only to be awakened the next morning by the roar of Dewey's guns in Manila Bay heralding the message, startling to ourselves as well as to the world, that the United States of America had become a great world Power with colonial possessions and new political interests and responsibilities in distant parts of the world.

Not the Great War, as many have thought, but the war with Spain made us a world Power.

In the Spanish-American War the veritable but latent idealism of America broke forth with irresistible force and in direct refuta-

tion of the oft-made assertion that "all wars are government made". The war with Spain was not willed by President McKinley, nor by his associates, but was demanded in countless petitions and clamorous appeals by the American people of all classes in the name of justice and of human rights at a moment when the Government hesitated to take the grave step. And when the war was brought to a victorious conclusion, this "selfish" American people withdrew from Cuba without a thought of reward or compensation, thereby adding through disinterested idealism a new and rich jewel to the bright diadem of young republics of the world. But before so doing, America transformed Havana, at the sacrifice of the lives of courageous American medical men, from a veritable pesthole into one of the most healthful cities of the world. In Panama, in Venezuela, and again in the Philippines, the true spirit of disinterested helpfulness and of generous humanitarianism was eloquently exemplified by the people of the United States. When the story of American administration in the Philippines shall have been finally recorded, brilliantly illumined by the long and illustrious roll of honor of the American men and women who laid down their lives voluntarily for the best interests of an alien people, no finer chapter of American history will have been penned, nor more conclusive evidence adduced of the fundamentally humanitarian character of the American mind and heart. And again, what a strange form of national "selfishness" it was which prompted the people of the United States, unsolicited, to return to China the large sums due as indemnity for the Boxer Uprising that they might be used by the Chinese people for educational purposes! This simple and unostentatious act began a new chapter in the history of the international relations of peoples. The so-called "selfish" American had moved the whole world a great stride forward toward the ultimate goal toward which men have long been striving—international coöperation and good-will.

These changes in the vision and outlook of the American people—changes more apparent than real, for they are not new but a part of our unseen heritage of idealism from out the past—have brought, of course, new duties and responsibilities in their train. We could not avoid these manifold responsibilities if we would,

and surely we would not if we could. For already the gaze of China and of other more or less helpless nations of Europe as well as of the Far-East is fixed upon the Stars and Stripes as the symbol of international justice and good-will—the harbinger of the coming of a new and happier day for the lesser and more peace-loving nations of the world. The idealistic stand taken by a Democratic President at the Peace Conference at Paris, and the efforts toward world peace made by a Republican President in connection with the Conference for the Limitation of Armament, but bear out the contention that American idealism is not only nothing new, but that it is neither sectional nor political but national in its scope.

It cannot be too emphatically insisted upon that the United States was not drawn into the dizzy vortex of international life by the Great War. We were already inextricably involved in it. But so gradually and naturally had it all come about that our nation as a whole never realized the slow but sure grindings of the wheel of destiny. The entry of America into the Great War was not a species of interruption in the normal flow of its idealism, but was the irresistible on-pressing of the great current of “will to human service” which had its source in the ideal of mutual helpfulness of our pioneer ancestors, grew into splendid proportions in all forms of philanthropic endeavor in the century just closed, and has but grown in magnitude and in influence from those days till the present.

Many Americans, to be sure, not realizing the profound significance of the great undercurrents of our national life, have hoped that the wide rift occasioned by the war in our dyke of exclusivism would be merely temporary. They have failed, however, to profit by the lessons of world history. It must not be forgotten that each great nation which has in turn been drawn into the arena of world affairs, has never been able to extricate itself until its race as a great world Power had been run; until it had played the rôle on the stage of history which the hand of Destiny had marked out for it. Orators have preached, and prophets have warned, but history teaches that no man, nor body of men, has ever been able to make the wheels of national history turn backward. They may be slowed down for a moment, apparently, but

reversed, never. And yet there are political prophets in our own day who believe that it is possible to dam the flood of international waters which poured through the great breach in our dyke of exclusivism through which sailed our ships and our men into participation in world affairs during the Great War. They are out of touch, however, with the realities of accomplished facts and unconscious of the mighty force of the tidal waters they dream of stemming. They appear not aware that long before the late war many another opening had been forced in our dyke of isolation—commerce, investments, colonies, and all the manifold interests, responsibilities and intanglements inherent in, and inseparable from, great national prosperity and power. He who would attribute the entry of the United States into the recent war, without desire for financial, political, or territorial gain, to a sort of temporary exaltation or aberration of the national mind, has failed to note the most characteristic, though little recognized, element of the American temperament which may one day be of incalculable advantage to the human race. What the world now terms “American humanitarianism” is but the American spirit of philanthropy at home translated into our international relations. Far from being something “new” and “dangerous”, it is but the spirit of the American “will to human service” following the flag abroad.

The isolated position of the United States for almost a century brought with it a subconscious feeling, shared by some even to-day, that we were a sort of “chosen people” to whom the usual laws of national development somehow were not applicable; that for some reason history in our case would not repeat itself. We failed, however, to note one great and infallible law of national growth. We disregarded the teaching of history that a nation which has, spiritually speaking, something in its national heart worth giving to the world, must sooner or later burst the bonds of its frontiers, be they mountain or sea, and pour forth its accumulated heritage of spiritual blessings for the common advantage of the peoples of the world. Nor must the converse of this law be forgotten; that a nation which remains permanently secluded behind its frontiers possesses in all probability little that is worth while giving to the world. When the spirit that was Greece

reached its apogee, it overflowed the confines of Hellas and poured itself forth, a great flood of artistic idealism with which to bless mankind. Rome has bequeathed to posterity the traditions of a vast empire. But there had been many a great empire before the Capitol became the seat of world-wide dominion. The spiritual heritage which Rome left as a monument of its moral worth—its legal mind codified into a great legal system—transcended even its imperial frontiers and has endured in other great legal codes till our own day when Rome as an empire is but a memory. The art that was Greece and the legal temperament that was Rome reflect the idealism of great peoples who had something within their national souls worth giving to the world, and whose spirit, therefore, broke the bonds of national frontiers and became the common heritage of humanity. This is the supreme test of a truly great people.

Are the people of the United States truly great? Great we are in material things: great in world power. But what when, like the other great political entities of the past, our nation too "goes West"? What will have been our national contribution to the sum total of human happiness, which, in last analysis, means "spiritual" happiness? With the eyes of the world centered upon us, the mighty colossus of modern political history, can we point to any non-material achievement which will be termed by a grateful posterity the spiritual bequest of the United States of America to the sum total of highest human good? In art, literature, law, and science our achievements, while commendable, have not been outstanding. In none of these fields of human endeavor have we assisted man to take a great onward and upward step on the slow and toilsome journey toward his ultimate destiny; in none of these departments have we given to man a spiritual asset which will go far toward lifting him above the commonplace realities and sordid selfishness of everyday life. In a word the highest idealism of the United States has not yet expressed itself in immortal terms in any of these fields.

It will perhaps be seen, however, from the outstanding events in our domestic and international relations recounted above, and from the high rôle which we are at this moment playing, that the United States of America may after all have made one contribu-

tion of supreme importance to the spiritual advancement of mankind; a gift which, while it issues more nearly from the heart than from the head, may nevertheless take its place one day among the few truly great national contributions of the past. If we but remain true to the traditions which inspired the hearts of our American ancestors and became translated in the hands of their descendants of yesterday and to-day into deeds of service, justice, mercy and human coöperation, no fear need be felt but that the historian of the future will pronounce national humanitarianism—the will to disinterested human service—the original national contribution of the United States to the higher idealism of the world. There was art, to be sure, before Greece, legal systems before Rome, and humanitarianism before the birth of the United States. But art became great art first in Greece, because Hellenic idealism was profoundly artistic; legal procedure became a great legal system first in Rome, because the idealism of Rome was essentially legal; the spirit of philanthropic endeavor became world-wide humanitarian service first in America, because the idealism of the United States has been and is preëminently humanitarian. We cast no aspersions upon the artistic taste of other nations in assigning a supreme place in art to Greece; nor would we, by the same token, draw any invidious comparison in the field of humanitarianism when we recognize the simple historical fact that the United States of America is the first great nation of the world to make the spirit of disinterested human service the measure of a nation as well as of a man. Just as there has never been a race in the veins of whose individual citizens the spirit of classic art flowed so irresistibly as in the citizen of Athens, so there has never been a nation in the blood of whose individual citizens the spirit of philanthropy and will to human service pulsed so strongly as in that of the citizen of the United States. Greece gave to the world supreme beauty in art. May we not hope that history will record that the people of the United States gave to the world supreme grandeur in service?

The exalting of humanitarianism and philanthropic impulses to distinctively American national virtues might appear to some to be a displacing of the ideals of liberty and freedom, so long regarded by us as peculiarly American traits. It would be assum-

ing too much, however, to claim the love of independence as the contribution of the United States to the advancement of mankind. We must not value our ideal of American independence less, but appreciate our national virtue of humanitarianism more. The spirit of license abroad in the United States, the growing insistence upon "independence" of thought and action, the tendency of certain movements to reawaken medieval religious intolerance, all these unfortunate reflections of political and spiritual unrest and uncertainty, can be overcome if we realize more profoundly that true "Americanism" is not exemplified by exhibitions of reckless independence but by a spirit of coöperation for the common good. We must learn that the independent and defiant attitude toward men and measures is not the spirit of the nation. That every movement which tends to drive the wedge of discord deep into the national heart is un-American, unpatriotic, and a blot upon the national flag. That our nation is big in achievement, big in hope, but biggest of all in the inspiring "will to service" — philanthropic and coöperative service at home and disinterested human service abroad. That the supreme achievement of America has been to stand for fair-play, to close its heart to a remarkable degree to selfish promptings, and to contribute generously in an exalted spirit of disinterested service toward the forwarding of the ideal of international comity and good-will.

LINDSEY BLAYNEY.